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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KISL](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [SY](#) [IR](#)
SUBJECT: SUNNI RELIGIOUS LEADER INSISTS SARG TRYING TO
STIFLE CRITICISM OF IRAN, "SHIA-IZATION"

REF: DAMASCUS 0128

CLASSIFIED BY: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES MICHAEL CORBIN, PER 1.4 B,D.

11. (C) SUMMARY: IN A MID-FEBRUARY CONVERSATION WITH A/DCM, DAYS BEFORE BASHAR AL-ASAD'S MOST RECENT TRIP TO TEHRAN, PROMINENT SUNNI SHEIKH SALAH KUFTARO CRITICIZED THE ASAD REGIME FOR TRYING TO SUPPRESS SUNNI CRITICISM OF IRANIAN-LED "SHIA-IZATION" ACTIVITIES IN SYRIA. WHILE PROVIDING FEW SPECIFICS REGARDING THE ALLEGED ACTIVITIES, KUFTARO SPOKE AT LENGTH ABOUT EVIDENCE OF THE SUNNI BACKLASH AND REGIME EFFORTS TO SILENCE IT. REGARDING UPCOMING PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS, KUFTARO SAID THAT HE HAS AGREED TO SUPPORT THE DAMASCUS LIST OF INDEPENDENTS BEING PUT TOGETHER BY BUSINESSMAN (AND CORRUPT REGIME CRONY) MOHAMMED HAMSHO. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) AT A FEBRUARY 13 CONVERSATION WITH A/DCM, SUNNI RELIGIOUS LEADER SALAH KUFTARO CRITICIZED THE BASHAR AL-ASAD REGIME FOR TRYING TO STIFLE SUNNI CRITICISM OF WHAT HE DESCRIBED AS IRANIAN-FINANCED PROSELYTIZING EFFORTS IN SYRIA. KUFTARO LAUNCHED INTO THE SUBJECT BY NOTING THAT TWO VISITORS, FAWAZ ISREB AND ISSA SHEBIB, WHO WERE LEAVING AS A/DCM ARRIVED, HAD BEEN "SENT BY BASHAR" TO SUGGEST THAT KUFTARO AVOID MAKING ANY CRITICAL STATEMENTS ON THIS TOPIC. ISREB, DESCRIBED BY KUFTARO AS A CLOSE FRIEND OF BASHAR, REPORTEDLY OBSERVED THAT SUCH CRITICISMS WOULD NOT BE IN THE BEST INTERESTS OF THE ABU NOOR INSTITUTE, THE SPRAWLING ISLAMIC COMPLEX THAT KUFTAROS FATHER, THE FORMER GRAND MUFTI OF SYRIA, HAD ESTABLISHED, AND WHICH SON SALAH NOW RUNS.

13. (C) TO FURTHER ILLUSTRATE THE DYNAMIC, KUFTARO RECOUNTED THAT SUNNI SHEIKH WAHABI ZUHEILI, ONE OF THE MOST PROMINENT ISLAMIC SCHOLARS IN DAMASCUS, HAD RECENTLY DELIVERED A FRIDAY SERMON AT A KEY DOWNTOWN MOSQUE, WHERE HE RAILED AGAINST THE PHENOMENON OF SHIAS IN SYRIA TRYING TO CONVERT SUNNIS. ACCORDING TO KUFTARO, ZUHEILI INSISTED TO THE PACKED MOSQUE THAT THE IRANIANS WERE FINANCING THE EFFORT AND ADDED DEFIANTLY THAT "SUNNIS WON'T ALLOW IT." THE FOLLOWING WEEK, ZUHEILI WAS SUMMONED SEPARATELY TO SYRIAN MILITARY INTELLIGENCE, POLITICAL SECURITY, AND (TWICE) TO THE GENERAL INTELLIGENCE DIRECTORATE, SAID KUFTARO. SENIOR OFFICERS SUCH AS SMI'S FOUAD NASSIF KHAIRBEK AND GID'S DAMASCUS BRANCH CHIEF HASSAN DIAB WERE COURTEOUS BUT INSISTENT, NOTED KUFTARO, WARNING SHEIKH ZUHEILI THAT "THESE ARE GRAVE ALLEGATIONS. WE WOULD LIKE TO SUBSTANTIATE THEM. DO YOU HAVE ANY EVIDENCE? YOU SHOULD NOT MAKE SUCH ALLEGATIONS IN THE FUTURE WITHOUT EVIDENCE."

14. (C) KUFTARO SAID THAT IN GENERAL HE AVOIDED MAKING SUCH

ALLEGATIONS PUBLICLY, BUT EXPRESSED IRRITATION THAT THE REGIME IS MORE FOCUSED ON STIFLING THE SUNNI CRITICISM, ESPECIALLY ANY THAT MIGHT EMBARRASS OR ANGER IRAN, THAN ON INVESTIGATING THE PHENOMENON OR PUTTING A STOP TO ANY ABUSES OR ACTIVITIES THAT COULD STIR UP SECTARIAN FRICTIONS. IN KUFTARO'S VIEW, ASAD "IS NOT WILLING TO HEAR ANY CRITICISM OF IRAN." KUFTARO ALSO COMPLAINED THAT WHILE THE SARG SYSTEMATICALLY BLOCKED HIS EFFORTS (AND THOSE OF OTHER SUNNIS) TO INCREASE ISLAMIC OUTREACH, IT WAS ALLOWING UNIMPEDED SHIA ACTIVITY. KUFTARO NOTED THAT THE SARG HAD ALLOWED EIGHT IRAQI SHIA RELIGIOUS OFFICES TO OPEN IN THE SUBURBS OF SAIDA ZEINAB, AN IRAQI SHIITE STRONGHOLD ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF DAMASCUS (WHILE PREVENTING KUFTARO AND OTHER SUNNIS FROM MOUNTING SUCH EFFORTS).

15. (C) KUFTARO FURTHER REPORTED THAT THE SARG HAD ALLOWED THE ESTABLISHMENT OF TWO RELIGIOUS SCHOOLS -- WHICH HE SUSPECTED WERE SHIITE IN THEOLOGICAL ORIENTATION -- TO OPEN IN THE TOWNS OF IDLIB AND AR-RAQQA. KUFTARO INTIMATED THAT THE SCHOOLS WERE FINANCED WITH IRANIAN MONEY AND NOTED THAT HE WAS QUIETLY INVESTIGATING TO GATHER MORE INFORMATION. HE NOTED THAT IN IDLIB HALF OF THE STUDENTS HAD DROPPED OUT OF THE SCHOOL IN THE PAST SEVERAL MONTHS BECAUSE OF DISSATISFACTION WITH THE SHIITE FLAVOR OF THE TEACHING. ACCORDING TO KUFTARO, THE PRIMARY CHANNEL FOR MUCH THE IRANIAN-RELATED SHIA ACTIVITY IS THE CULTURAL SECTION OF THE IRANIAN EMBASSY. (NOTE: AN ALAWITE CONTACT ECHOED THIS ASSESSMENT IN A SEPARATE CONVERSATION WITH POLOFF, NOTING THAT THE IRANIAN EMBASSY'S CULTURAL SECTION SOMETIMES USED FARSI LANGUAGE TRAINING PROGRAMS, OFFERED AT NO COST, IN PROVINCIAL TOWNS LIKE LATTAKIA, TO EMPHASIZE SHIA BELIEFS.)

16. (C) MUFTI ALSO TRYING TO HUSH THE SUNNIS: KUFTARO

OBSERVED THAT THE CURRENT GRAND MUFTI, SHEIKH AHMED HASSOUN, ADOPTING THE REGIME'S VIEW, HAD RECENTLY ASKED A GATHERING OF SUNNI CLERICS TO PROVIDE HIM WITH EVIDENCE OF EVEN ONE CASE OF SUNNI-TO-SHIITE CONVERSION. KUFTARO SAID HE HAD RESPONDED BY NOTING THAT THE REAL EVIDENCE OF THE PHENOMENON WAS NOT SPECIFIC CASES, BUT THE EXTENT OF SUNNI BACKLASH. HE SAID HE TOLD THE MUFTI THAT IN RAQQA, THE HEAD OF THE AWQAAF THERE HAD TOLD HIM RECENTLY THAT THERE WERE SUNNIS CHANGING THEIR ORIENTATION FROM MODERATE SUFISM TO FUNDAMENTALIST WAHABISM, AND WHO ARE NOW THREATENING TO BOMB THE HUGE, IRANIAN-FINANCED SHRINE AND RELIGIOUS COMPLEX THAT HAS BEEN BUILT THERE FOR SHIITE PILGRIMS (REFTEL). KUFTARO ALSO REPORTED THAT THE DIRECTOR OF THIS NEW COMPLEX WAS A SUNNI WHO HAD CONVERTED TO SHIISM. (COMMENT: OTHER CONTACTS HAVE ALSO REPORTED THIS SUNNI BACKLASH WHICH SEEMS TO BE STOKING TO SOME DEGREE A WAHABI FUNDAMENTALIST TREND IN SYRIA, ALTHOUGH THE EXTENT OF THE PHENOMENON IS NOT CLEAR.)

17. (C) UPCOMING ELECTIONS: REGARDING THE UPCOMING PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS, KUFTARO SAID THAT HE HAS AGREED TO SUPPORT THE LIST OF INDEPENDENTS FOR DAMASCUS BEING PUT TOGETHER BY BUSINESSMAN (AND CORRUPT REGIME CRONY) MOHAMMED HAMSHO. THE ENDORSEMENT CAME AFTER HAMSHO AGREED TO EXCLUDE THE LIBERAL ISLAMIC CLERIC AND CURRENT MP MOHAMMED HABASH, A LONG-TIME KUFTARO RIVAL (AND HIS IN-LAW). HABASH HAS BEEN REPLACED ON THE LIST BY SHEIKH ABDULSALAM RAJEH, A KUFTARO FAVORITE. ACCORDING TO KUFTARO, HABASH WAS ADVISED BY SMI CHIEF ASIF SHAWKAT TO JOIN THE LIST OF COMPETING BUSINESSMAN HASHEM AKKAD, A SHAWKAT PROTEGE. HABASH MAY HAVE HURT HIMSELF POLITICALLY WITH HIS RECENT PUBLIC STATEMENT THAT THE SARG WAS CONSIDERING, AFTER THE ELECTIONS, AMENDING ARTICLE 8 OF THE CONSTITUTION, WHICH MANDATES RULING PARTY STATUS FOR THE BA'ATH, SAID KUFTARO. PRESIDENT ASAD AT A RECENT BA'ATH CENTRAL COMMITTEE MEETING, SAID SUCH A CHANGE WAS NOT BEING CONSIDERED, UNDERCUTTING HABASH, NOTED KUFTARO HAPPILY.

18. (C) COMMENT: THE "SHIA-IZATION" PHENOMENON IN SYRIA CONTINUES TO ROIL, REGARDLESS OF THE LACK OF SPECIFICS ABOUT INDIVIDUAL CASES OF PROSELYTIZING AND CONVERSION. WHILE SUCH CASES MAY BE THE SECTARIAN EQUIVALENT OF AN URBAN LEGEND, SUNNI RESENTMENT OF IRANIAN CULTURAL ACTIVITY IN SYRIA IS REAL, AS KUFTARO'S REMARKS CLEARLY UNDERLINE. HIS ACCUSATION

THAT THE REGIME IS UNMOVED BY THE SUNNI IRRITATION, AND IS ONLY FOCUSED ON SILENCING THE CRITICISMS OF IRAN, SEEMS A BIT OVERSTATED. WHILE THE REGIME IS USING THE SECURITY SERVICES TO TRY TO SUPPRESS SUCH CRITICISMS, THERE IS EVIDENCE, WHICH WE HAVE REPORTED ELSEWHERE, THAT SOME IN THE REGIME ARE CONCERNED ABOUT THE REPORTED SUNNI BACKLASH AND THE IRANIAN CULTURAL OUTREACH ACTIVITIES THAT SEEM TO BE PROVOKING IT.

CORBIN